Coming Out of Their Shells: Effective Techniques for Promoting Oral Participation in Japanese EFL Classes

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Abstract

As the field of TEFL moves increasingly towards communicative, interactional pedagogy, and as more locally, the Japanese Ministry of Education continues to stress the importance of improving oral production, the need to get students speaking English in class has become crucial. However, as any TEFL instructor ever faced with a class full of silent, unresponsive Japanese learners can attest, this is a task far easier said than done. With this difficult yet vital dilemma in mind, this paper will explain five techniques that can be employed to transform a reticent, uncommunicative class into a more vocally active, dynamic group. I will overview some of the most pertinent research and theories underpinning these techniques, as well as look at some practical methods to apply them in class. I will also briefly examine the issue of the silent Japanese EFL classroom and its sources.

Introduction

Just about every TEFL teacher who has stepped in front of a classroom of learners has, at some point, been faced with quiet, shy and/or unresponsive students. The experience can be unnerving, a sensation not unlike we imagine an actor or comedian feels when a performance falls flat, receiving as a response only the proverbial sound of crickets. Moreover, though difficult for the instructor, the situation is even more detrimental to the students, who receive little benefit in their oral communication skills by passively listening to the teacher. It is by now widely accepted in the field of TEFL that students must actively engage with the target language (TL) if they are to have any chance of attaining oral proficiency (Ellis, 1994; Gass, Mackey, & Pica, 1998; Swain, 1995).

Furthermore, the problem of the silent second-language classroom seems to be exacerbated in Japan where, for a variety of cultural and institutional reasons, silence is viewed as the normal state of affairs in the classroom, and is oftentimes actively encouraged (King, 2013, pp. 62-63). The problem of achieving an active, orally engaged class thus becomes even more difficult in the Japanese EFL context. This paper, therefore, presents five techniques which the author has found to be effective for promoting oral participation in his role as a tertiary EFL instructor in Japan: 1) Greeting students as they enter/exit class; 2) Posing daily questions to students; 3) Identifying and utilizing outgoing students; 4) Using classroom activities and games; 5) Using humor in class. For teachers new to Japanese tertiary EFL instruction, these methods can provide a solid framework for conducting successful lessons. For more experienced EFL instructors, who may already be familiar with many of these techniques, a look at their theoretical underpinnings will help to deepen understanding of their value and efficacy. Therefore, as I go through these five techniques, I will examine some of the most relevant research and theoretical discussions pertaining to each technique, as well as consider some of the ways they can be applied in the classroom.

Background

Before delving into these techniques, let us take a moment to consider the issue of student oral participation. Setting aside the thornier issue of whether or not EFL classes should be

conducted solely in the TL, a point which has been debated (Lameta-Tufuga, 1994; Nation, 1997; Swain & Lapkin, 2000), and taking as our starting point EFL classes conducted almost entirely in the TL, we find that a large body of research favors the active use of the TL by students in order to facilitate progress, whether through interaction, output, or the negotiation of meaning (Ellis, 1999; Gass, 1997; Iwashita, 2003; Long, 1996; Mackey, 2002). Just as we must hop on and pedal if we are to learn to ride a bicycle, so students must speak and negotiate with the TL in order to become competent in their oral production.

A great deal of anecdotal evidence from teachers and other professionals in the field points to the peculiarly intense nature of taciturnity in the Japanese setting. This is borne out by researchers and theorists who have analyzed the phenomenon (Fischer & Yoshida, 1968; Ishii & Bruneau, 1994; McDaniel, 2003; Pritchard & Maki, 2006). The reserved nature of the Japanese EFL classroom has even spawned entire books hoping to explicate its causes. In his recent work on the subject, Jim King (2013, pp. 62-63) identifies a number of origins behind the reticent Japanese EFL classroom, including Confucian ideals of passive education, cultural attachment to empathy and non-vocal communication, early developmental socialization which values implicit rather than vocal communication, and an overall tendency in Japanese society to employ silence as a face-saving strategy. Add to these overarching factors the reality of a Japanese pre-tertiary EFL education emphasizing receptive language skills over active ones, in which non-native speakers with limited spoken abilities often teach classes (King, 2013, pp. 62-63), and we can begin to see why the burden of silence lies so heavily upon Japanese EFL classes. Indeed, these combined forces are so great that, as King (2013) puts it (in reference to the dynamic systems theory), “silence has now formed a semi-permanent attractor state within Japan’s L2 university classrooms” (p. 9).

Five Techniques

So what can we teachers do when faced with a silent EFL class in Japan? The solution of weathering on with our courses, hoping for the odd unsolicited comment from our most outgoing students, though tempting, is not a truly viable option. What then? While there is no golden lesson plan which is going to transform a taciturn class into a dynamic, outgoing one overnight, there are nevertheless things that we can do to get our students to come out of their shells. Like

any worthwhile accomplishment (including that of learning a foreign language), getting students to open up and freely participate in class is a process that happens only gradually. However, if we are determined and patient, it is achievable. Bearing all of this in mind, here are five techniques which can be highly effective when applied consistently over time.

Greet Students at the Door

Perhaps one of the simplest techniques of all is also one of the most overlooked. Simply saying hello and goodbye to students as they enter and exit the classroom provides a chance to form a personal connection and to interact, if only briefly, with every single student in the class. This is especially important for the most shy or reticent students, who may have limited other opportunities for interaction (even with other students). In the experience of the author, these are the students who are the most appreciative of and receptive to regular greetings[1].

Research has pointed to the effectiveness of greetings in attaining a number of positive outcomes in the classroom. In their study on the effects of teacher greetings on three middle school students with problem behaviors, Allday and Pakurar (2007) determined that greetings produced a significant increase in the students' on-task behavior. A more recent study found that teacher greetings not only resulted in increased on-task behavior, but also in less disruptive classroom behavior as well (Cook et al., 2018). In sum, greetings produce a more positive and responsive classroom atmosphere, with students more willing to participate and follow instructions.

It is not difficult for us to extrapolate these findings to the EFL setting. After all, we can reasonably assume that students who interact with the teacher regularly in one aspect of the class will be more willing to in other aspects as well. In the experience of the author, this is indeed the case. Moreover, greetings can also present a great opportunity to further our knowledge of, and deepen relationships with, students. This can be accomplished by taking our greetings one step further. In its basic form a greeting consists of merely a hello or goodbye, though as time progresses and the teacher learns more about each student, greetings can evolve into longer exchanges. This might include asking students about extra-curricular activities, about jobs or

[1] As many seasoned EFL instructors already know, greeting students, along with all the other techniques elucidated in this paper, is most effective when coupled with learning individual students' names. Though not labeled as a technique in this paper, learning names provides a foundation for building rapport and is highly recommended.

hobbies, commenting (positively) on fashion choices or new hair styles - the author has even learned a great deal about J-Pop and K-Pop music by asking students what they were listening to on their smartphones, knowledge which has come in handy during many open class discussions.

Obviously there will be instances where long greetings may not be feasible, or in rare cases even short greetings. But once we begin to see the benefits of regularly greeting our students over time, and consider what a relatively easy way it is for us to increase student responsiveness, it is likely we will make time for this surprisingly effective technique.

Daily Questions

Much like greetings, daily questions asked to students ensure that every student speaks a modicum of English in each class. The questions can be paired with the opening task of taking roll which many teachers are required to do. In this way, the otherwise tedious task of roll-taking can be enlivened for both students and instructor.

The procedure is as follows: before class begins, the teacher writes a question on the board (a question related to the grammar point or theme of the lesson can tie in nicely). The complexity of the question can vary according to the level of the class, though as a rule it should be relatively simple to understand and respond to. Some examples might be “What is your favorite food?”, “What would you do with a million dollars?”, or “Where do you want to travel to?” (To avoid one word replies, it is a good idea to include follow up questions.). Once students are seated, the teacher reads or has a volunteer read the question to the class. The teacher explains the question, checks for comprehension, and can also take a moment to provide their own personal response. The students are then asked to think of their own reply, and when their name is called during roll call, they answer the question.

In addition to providing students with a regular opportunity for oral output, daily questions offer the teacher a chance to learn about the personalities of individual students. It quickly becomes clear that some are more willing to provide detailed answers than others (more on these outgoing types in the next section). In time however, and with regular questioning, the teacher should be able to form an impression of even the most reticent students in the class. Moreover, as the teacher provides model answers to the questions, the students learn more about what kind of person is leading their class, knowledge which helps to strengthen student-teacher bonds and put students at ease.

This knowledge can aid in fostering positive group dynamics, a point which merits further consideration. To summarize the theory of group dynamics briefly, when applied to the classroom setting, group dynamics attempts to analyze the relationships between the various members of a class, both students and instructor, and to isolate and promulgate factors leading to positive outcomes; in other words, to explain what makes us as educators label certain classes as being “good” or “bad” regardless of static measurements like academic success. A number of researchers in the field have highlighted the importance of shared knowledge and personal information amongst members of a class as a key component of positive group dynamics (Dörnyei & Murphy, 2003; Hadfield, 1992; Senior, 1997). This shared knowledge, they point out, helps to break down barriers between class members and establish rapport. Daily questions provide one way to strengthen mutual understanding, and with it, students' comfort with one another.

A caveat should be added at this point. Given the size of the class, it may not be feasible to pose a question to every single student, and even in classes small enough to accommodate this, it may not be desirable to ask every student a question each class, as this risks becoming tedious. In these situations, some solutions are available. The first is to not pose the question to every student, but to do a kind of random sampling of fewer students, based on class interest and time constraints. A second option is to first ask the question, and then break students into groups to discuss their answers. The teacher can then call on one group representative to summarize the group’s opinions. In either case, care must be taken to call on different students each day, so that it is not always the same few offering their answers. One final idea to keep the activity fresh is to use the question as the jumping off point for an icebreaker or mingling activity where students interact with a number of others in the class, reporting their results afterward. All of these activities will provide students with opportunities for output of the TL, in keeping with research suggesting its importance to the EFL setting (Swain, 1985; Swain & Lapkin, 1995).

Identify and Utilize Outgoing Students

As mentioned earlier, during the first few weeks of a course, it generally becomes clear who the more outgoing students are in the class. Even in the most reserved of Japanese EFL classrooms, there are inevitably one or two individuals willing to speak out more than the rest. These outgoing types of students can take myriad forms, but for our purposes it suffices to say

that all of them, despite varied motivations, can serve a vital role in our classrooms. Outgoing students, through their willingness to communicate (WTC), serve as a role model for the quieter, less responsive students in the class, and aid the teacher in creating an environment more favorable to oral contributions.

In this case I am using a definition of WTC not as a personality trait, in line with McCroskey and Baer's (1985) early conception of it, but along the lines of MacIntyre et al's (MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, Noels, 1998) definition of it as, "a situational variable with both transient and enduring influences" (p. 546). It is primarily with the transient influences with which we are concerned here. In MacIntyre et al's (1998) heuristic model of variables influencing WTC, the act of communicating in a L2 is represented as a pyramid with six layers, the top three of which concern the aforementioned transient influences. At the very top of the pyramid is the act of communicating in a L2. When a student achieves this in class, it behooves us as educators not to suppress or inhibit the student's expression, even if it does not always directly follow our intentions or lesson plan. In addition, by allowing the student to speak, we are freeing up a space in the lower layers of the pyramid. For example, the second layer of the pyramid is composed of Behavioral Intention, defined by WTC. When we allow an outgoing student to express themselves, we demonstrate to all the students in the class that their oral participation will be accepted. This point is particularly important for the Japanese context wherein students might not even realize they are allowed to contribute orally, due to the social and educational situation prevalent in Japan.

Moving down the pyramid, in the third layer, defined as Situational Antecedents, we find the desire to communicate with a specific person. As other students witness the pleasant exchanges between outgoing students and the teacher, we can reasonably expect their own desire to speak with a specific person (in this case the teacher) to increase. Finally, we can even hope, if not necessarily assume, that encouraging outgoing students to speak will make inroads into even lower layers of MacIntrye et al's (1998) pyramid of variables influencing WTC. The fifth layer of the pyramid describes the Affective-Cognitive Context, and includes the social situation in which WTC occurs. According to MacIntyre et al (1998), important variables here include the participants "power-relationship...level of intimacy," and the, "extent of their shared knowledge" (p. 553). Allowing outgoing students to speak presents teachers an opportunity to redefine all of these variables.

All of that being said, it is still not realistic for us to assume that all the students in our class are going to become uninhibited chatterboxes after witnessing the interactions of the outgoing students. Social and Individual Context still form the base of MacIntyre et al.'s heuristic model, and we are unlikely to significantly alter these in the course of a sixty minute lesson, or even a yearlong course. Nevertheless, by allowing a space for oral participation, we are doing what is within our means to promote our students' WTC.

Moreover, as other students witness the interactions of the more outgoing class members, they are not only shown a model of how they can contribute orally to the class, but the entire class also begins to develop a sense of group roles. This is again in line with theories of group dynamics as applied to the EFL class. As Senior (1997) explains, "a variety of roles can be found for class members, so that when a class is fully bonded every student has a role which contributes to the maintenance of the class group" (p. 9). This can be particularly important in the Japanese context, helping the class to form an identity wherein each class member sees themselves as part of an "in-group" comprised of the entire class. As mentioned, not every student is going to take on the role of the most vocal, yet given time and appropriate direction, every class member should be able to find a role that contributes to the group and encourages oral participation. As an example, in a recent class, I had one student admit during an information sharing activity that he enjoyed smelling sweaty socks. The confession was met with peals of laughter from his classmates, and the knowledge became a kind of running joke that we could return to throughout the semester. The student was, moreover, enthusiastic about taking on the role of funny oddball, despite his limited English abilities, and the class recognized and delighted in his role, often calling on him for offbeat examples and comments. An unpredictable and somewhat strange turn of events indeed, yet one made possible by creating an environment that welcomes student participation and oral input.

Activities and Games

A body of research points to the efficacy of using games in an EFL context (Crookall & Oxford, 1990; Tomlinson & Matsuhara, 2009; Wright, Betteridge & Buckby, 1984). Much of this research focuses on increasing student motivation. According to Richard-Amato (1988), games can play a significant role in lowering L2 learner anxiety levels, thereby promoting participation. In my own experience, I have seen some of the quietest students become engaged

and uninhibited when caught up in the heat of a competition.

Nearly any game can serve our purposes here, whether it is backs to the board, a line-up activity, or others, so long as it is engaging and involves every student in the class. A few words of advice and caution are necessary, however, particularly for instructors with little or no experience conducting competitions in their classroom. Games are competitive by nature – this being the key that keeps students engaged in them. This competitiveness though, if unchecked, can lead to feelings of ill-will and insecurity amongst class members, a situation definitely not conducive to open and free participation. In order to avoid this outcome, there are things we as teachers can do before, during and after an activity to keep it from getting out of hand.

Firstly, make sure to put students into teams. This keeps the final results from becoming too personal and promotes camaraderie amongst team members. This is especially important in Japan, where in-group/out-group dynamics play such a large role in interpersonal relations (King, 2013, p. 36). I often then have the team members create a silly name for their group, further defusing any over-seriousness attached to the competition. During the game, the teacher should use their judgement to steer the competition away from becoming too burdensome upon any one class member. For example, in a vocabulary game, try not to give the most difficult word to a student lacking the sufficient skills (this requires knowing the students in a class, so it is wise to avoid at least some games until the teacher feels sufficiently informed). One more thing I like to do towards the end of a competition is to assign a ridiculous point value to the final question/task. If, for example, every response in a grammar game has been worth one point, with the score standing at Team A: 6 points, Team B: 5 points, I inform the students that the final question will be worth 1000 points. This is usually met with laughter by the two teams and is thereby effective in defusing tension. After the game, it is a good idea to quickly erase the results from the board. Before I realized this last point, I would often leave a tally on the board and blithely continue on with my lesson, only to notice students proudly or despairingly staring at the results long after the game had concluded.

Use Humor in Class

No matter how we slice it, learning a second language is an inherently dicey proposition. All jokes aside, humor can be used to change an unpleasant experience into an agreeable one, to "lighten the mood" as it were. There are few situations more nerve-racking, and hence more in

need of lightening than trying to express ourselves in a foreign language before a large group of people. This goes double for students in Japan where, as mentioned earlier, the society places a premium on the idea of saving face in front of one's peers. Yet despite a reputation as a sober, hard-working society, it has been my experience (as I am sure it is for many seasoned Japanese EFL instructors), that Japanese people, and Japanese university students in particular, are fond of humor and love to laugh. I have found my students to be receptive to a wide variety of humor, including the mispronunciation of Japanese words or names, pop culture references, gentle teasing about grammar errors and many others besides. Humor then presents us with a way to transcend the difficulties of an EFL class and get students to relax.

A number of studies have pointed to students' positive reception of humor in the classroom (Aylor & Oppliger, 2003; Berk & Nanda, 2009; Booth-Butterfield, Booth-Butterfield, & Wanzer, 2007). In one survey conducted with university students, 73% of respondents indicated their favorable attitude towards inclusion of humor in their classes, while a further 59% strongly agreed that humor promotes a sense of community (Torok, McMorris, & Wen-Chi, 2004). In the free response section of this same survey, a number of students mentioned humor's ability to "lower tension, [and] boost class morale" (Torok et al., 2004, p. 18). So much positive evidence in favor of humor should naturally make us want to include it in the EFL context as well. Yet the question remains, how to do so?

While some teachers are more at ease with humor than others, there remain options available to even the least comically inclined instructor. One opportunity that often presents itself are comical grammar errors that students make. Many EFL teachers transform into teachable moments instances when students confuse subjects and gender in speaking, for example, referring to a male classmate as "she" or informing the instructor, "I will go on vacation with *your* parents." In these cases it is simply a matter of repeating the error back to the student with a look of surprise, at which point they and the class recognize the error and share in a good-natured laugh. Also, as mentioned earlier, references to pop-culture, current events, or even the latest viral video are always appreciated (the Apple-Pen phenomenon (PIKOTARO, 2016) provided a veritable gold-mine of comedic material).

More important than any one technique, however, is the attitude that the teacher displays in class. Like so much else that takes place in our courses, a funny and carefree class begins with the teacher. Students pick up on a teacher's disposition. Take our lessons and ourselves too

seriously, and students will behave accordingly, with opportunities for levity lost; keep a light-hearted disposition, and students will do the same, with humor arising spontaneously as a result. One way to achieve this is by remembering to laugh at ourselves, keeping the things we do as instructors as our biggest comedic target (my frequent mispronunciation of Japanese is one example of this). In this way, we model to our students that perfection is not a requirement in our classroom, nor are mistakes a cause for grave concern, a point frequently emphasized in ESL literature (Corder, 1967; Edge, 1989; Hendrickson, 1987). This becomes a reinforcing loop in which students feel increasingly free to open up and enjoy themselves. Some of the funniest moments in my teaching career have come not from myself but from the actions and utterances of my pupils (sweaty sock anyone?).

Conclusion

In over 48 hours of classroom observation studying Japanese tertiary EFL classes as part of his study on classroom silence, Jim King recorded only seven instances of student-initiated talk (King, 2013, p. 92). That works out to only one unsolicited student comment per seven hours of class. This result speaks volumes about the need for change, and highlights our task as EFL teachers in the Japanese university system. In order to promote speaking, we must create a classroom environment in which students feel at ease and enjoy themselves. To help us achieve this, we can use the aforementioned techniques to ensure that students know about each other and the teacher; each student is appreciated and has a role to play; and all students believe that contributing orally is an actively encouraged, positive experience. Altogether, this will lead us to classes in which students are not only improving their spoken fluency, but which are also fun and enjoyable for everyone. After all, a class which takes contributions from all its members is not only conducive to improving spoken fluency, but is a truly dynamic space in which each individual is appreciated and has the opportunity to grow as a person.

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